



LITTLE SILVER PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Mr. Michael E. Ettore
Superintendent of Schools
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February 10, 2021

Dear Little Silver Families,

As much as we were all excited to have students in school five days a week as of February 1st, Mother Nature had other plans for us during these past two weeks. Hopefully, the conditions will improve and enable us to accomplish that goal later this month. However, it seemed like the snow day coupled with an unscheduled day of virtual learning at the beginning of last week created more of a sense of frustration from a group of parents who contacted me directly asking about the possibility of resuming our regular, full-day schedule for the district. To be consistent with my ongoing efforts to keep everyone fully informed regarding the status of our district and our reopening plans, I am issuing this letter to the entire community.

As a fellow parent and educator, I completely understand and appreciate the level of frustration and concern being expressed by many of the people in our community on behalf of the children that attend our schools. My goal remains to bring everyone back for regular, full days of learning and restore complete normalcy. However, as much as I am responsible for providing students with resources to support their learning needs, I am also equally accountable for the safety and wellbeing of everyone in our district. Just as schools are places of learning for our students, they are also a work environment for the adults that come to us each day. Managing all of the issues related to individual health conditions for staff and students along with the guidelines from the NJDOH and the CDC means taking all of these factors into consideration when making decisions related to our reopening status. In other words, there are plenty of variables that must be considered and factored into every decision that is made.

As much as I am truly only concerned about our district, like many of you, I also pay attention to what is happening in our neighboring districts and around the county as well. Since many of the parents that I heard from made comparisons to other districts that are open for five full days each week, I thought it would be helpful to share the actual data about where things stand across our county. Currently, out of the fifty-two operating districts in Monmouth County, there are just five districts that are open five full days each week at the elementary level. In four of those districts, the entire PK-8 population is housed in one building with an enrollment far less than what we have in LS. In the case of the fifth district, the decision to transition to full days was made in a very abrupt manner where I do not believe staff safety was given appropriate consideration. By comparison, LS is one of just fifteen districts in the county that now offers in-person learning five days each week. It is also worth noting that there are still seventeen districts in the county that are still either fully remote or only have students in school on a rotating, cohort basis two or three days a week. Based on this data, it is safe to say that our reopening status is certainly not lagging behind. That being said, there still seems to be some level of concern within our community that the district is unwilling to move forward and explore alternate options regarding our reopening status. In response, I would refer back to our district's Reopening Plan that outlined four distinct phases. After starting the year in Phase 2 with student cohorts attending school two days each week, we quickly moved to Phase 3 by the end of October where all students were invited to attend school four mornings each week. Phase 4 is the return to full-day schedules in both schools. I refer to our current status as "Phase 3A" because it was not part of our original plan. Phase 3A involved eliminating virtual Monday's and inviting students to attend school five days each week. As was just pointed out, Phase 3A exceeds the progress made by the majority of districts in our county.



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Another common concern I received from many parents is the level of “learning loss” that is occurring with our students this year as a result of our hybrid schedule. I believe this is a fair and valid concern, so I have asked our Director of Curriculum and Instruction, Angie Rosen, to create a brief presentation that will be shared at the BOE meeting on February 18 where she will provide specific data that illustrates the levels of student learning progress being made this year in both ELA and Math. Additionally, I have asked Mrs. Rosen to include data from the first half of the previous school year to show comparative progress points as well.

Like every other district, we have had our share of issues and setbacks related to Covid-19 that have caused students, classes and even entire schools to pivot to fully remote learning for a temporary period of time. As I have stated on multiple occasions, we have a Covid Team in place made of administration and both school nurses that meet each week to review our current data and discuss steps that need to be taken in response to that data. Our district data is also shared each week with our local health officials who provide us with guidance and recommendations regarding the status of our schools. Additionally, I am in constant contact with the Board of Education who continues to provide me with invaluable feedback and insights from the parent community. Knowing that it is highly likely we will be managing Covid cases and exposures for the remainder of the year, we will continue to take all of the appropriate precautions to keep our staff and students safe while they are at school. Currently, our data is moving in a better direction (3 Covid positive case at MPS and 1 at PRS; 45 people at MPS and 20 at PRS in quarantine). However, with the amount of travel that is expected during the upcoming long weekend, that data is certainly subject to change. Just as a reminder, if you do plan to travel this weekend, please notify the school nurse about your plans if you have not done so already.

Since I have been asked by many people to comment on the metrics being used to consider a transition to Phase 4 (regular, full-day schedules), it is worth noting that to date, neither the NJDOE nor the NJDOH have provided specific metrics to districts for this purpose. In the absence of specifics from the State, our Covid Team has agreed to use the following data points for our eventual transition to Phase 4:

- Needing the Covid Activity Report status in our area to move from orange (high) back to yellow (moderate). The County Office provides weekly reports on this data point to all districts, AND
- Seeing a consistent reduction in the number of positive Covid cases in our schools, AND
- Staff having access to a vaccination.

Currently, efforts are underway among the peninsula districts to provide our staff members that meet the 1B/high-risk criteria with access to a vaccination. Once that initial part of the process is complete, then hopefully this endeavor will result in the remainder of the staff having the chance to get vaccinated as well. At this point, we do not have a definitive timeline for this process to be complete since the supply of vaccinations is uncertain right now. However, getting our high-risk staff members vaccinated will be a critical step in the right direction for our district. I have reason to believe these staff members will receive their first dose of the vaccination this week or next.

Our staff and administration are currently working to create alternate approaches to lunch and recess time that could be implemented once we have reached a safer time to consider making the transition to Phase 4. Once the warmer weather arrives, more options will open up with regard to recess time in particular.



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Part of this process includes adjusting schedules in such a way to accommodate our special needs students and our students whose parents have chosen to keep them fully remote.

I realize that many of you are expecting me to provide an exact date for the transition of one or both schools to move into Phase 4. Until our current status becomes safer and more teachers are able to get vaccinated, we will remain in Phase 3A. Dating back to last spring, I have learned that our plans and expectations must remain flexible. As we make our way through the rest of this winter, our Covid Team will continue to monitor the aforementioned data points each week in hopes that we will be able to transition to Phase 4 later this year. Until that time arrives, we will continue to utilize our current schedule that allows students to be in school every day for in-person instruction. As I have done all year, I will continue to send out update notices on a regular basis to keep our community informed about our reopening status and our plans for the future.

Respectfully,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Michael E. Ettore". The signature is written in a cursive style.

Michael E. Ettore
Superintendent